Chapter 5
Sedimentation and Crystallisation: Two Metaphors for Political Change

Arguably one of Occupy Wall Street's most characteristic features was 'the people's mic' – which, like many of its inventions, was 'mothered by necessity' (Gould-Wartofsky 2015: 67). The New York police would not permit the use of electronic amplification in Zuccotti Park, and so its occupiers resorted to another, more archaic means of mass communication. The idea is simple: anyone who wants to make an announcement shouts the words 'mic check'. Those within earshot will respond by repeating these words, and then those within a hearing distance from *them* again repeat the 'mic check' until a large crowd has become silent and is listening to the speaker – who then makes their statement in short intervals, which allows the people's microphone to repeat the message sentence by sentence. When Slavoj Žižek came to address the occupiers with a short speech, his message was thus amplified by repetition. Frequently interrupted (and visibly annoyed) by the people's mic, Žižek praised the movement for its ability to imagine alternatives to the failing, capitalist order. But he also warned the occupiers: 'There is a danger: Don't fall in love with yourselves. We have a nice time here. But remember: Carnivals come cheap. What matters is the day after when we will have to return to normal life. Will there be any changes then?' (Žižek 2011: 68).

How can prefigurative democracy lead to social and political change in the long term? In the course of the past decade prefigurative movements have often been dismissed as 'failures' because they did not immediately result in any durable and concrete changes at an institutional level. However, it is debatable to what extent the meaning of prefigurative democracy, or the value of the experiences that it entails, really depend on its concrete outcomes. It is precisely this instrumentalist understanding of political action that prefigurative

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democracy seeks to challenge (Van de Sande 2013). This does not mean, however, that prefigurative democracy does not or cannot lead to radical change in the long term. How may it a have a lasting impact, after the streets have been cleared out and the activists have returned home (or even ended up in prison)?

In this chapter I reconstruct two metaphors for political change that can be encountered in the political thought of Laclau and Arendt: sedimentation and crystallisation. Each offers a different perspective on how prefigurative democracy might continue to shape our understanding of the world, after its moment has passed. Laclau argues that systematic change requires the reactivation of our 'sedimented' social relations and practices. The originary acts and contingent divisions that lie at the origin of our social reality must be uncovered and reinscribed with a new political discourse. Radical change thus pertains to a simultaneous de-sedimentation (or dis-articulation) of our old social reality, and a sedimentation (or rearticulation) of a new one. A political movement will be successful if – and only if – it eventually manages to inscribe and consolidate a new discourse into our predominant conception of the social. But it is impossible to foretell in advance what discursive impact a political intervention might have in the long term.

Arendt may offer a very different understanding of political change and the impact of prefigurative democracy. One of her favourite quotes, which she took from the Roman poet Lucan and that she intended to use as an epigraph to the (unfinished) third part of *Life of the Mind*, well captures her view in this regard: 'The victorious cause pleased the gods, but the defeated one pleases Cato' (Arendt 1992: ii; see also Arendt 1978: 216; Beiner 1994). At the end of the day, what renders a political action meaningful is not the measure of 'success' that it had in the short or even the long term. Arendt employs the term 'crystallisation' to describe how political deeds and experiences of the past continue to have a bearing on the present. Even when they seem to have disappeared from our collective memory, she argues, such experiences may nevertheless continue to lead a subterraneous life, and be resurfaced at a later stage in the form of story. They thus provide a testament to these experiences of the past and continue to inspire political deeds in the present. This is precisely why Arendt continues to return to the 'lost treasure' of council democracy – which was rediscovered and relived so many times in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century. No matter how they ended or what their immediate outcomes turned out to be,

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these prefigurative experiences of the past continue to hold the promise of radical change in the present and future.

Laclau: Political Change as Sedimentation

Laclau uses the concept 'sedimentation' in a few places, most significantly his essay 'New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time'. In order to appreciate his employment of this geological term, we must first reconstruct a few main aspects of his theoretical framework, in particular on his distinction between 'the social' and 'the political'. Laclau is a prominent exponent of what is sometimes called 'post-foundational' political philosophy. This means that, according to Laclau, our understanding of 'society' has no objective or essential foundation. What determines or characterises the social is radically open, and only this very openness is the 'constitutive ground or "negative essence" of the existing' (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 95). As Oliver Marchart stresses, however, this does not mean that social relations are entirely groundless. After all, we do have a certain shared understanding of society, and one way or the other this understanding must have some sort of foundation (Marchart 2007: 12–13). The point of the matter is that this foundation is constructed and that, for this very reason, it can never be complete: precisely because the social is radically plural and lacks any objective ground, there will always be something that escapes its constructed self-understanding as a 'society' (Marchart 2018: 84). The social 'always exceeds the limits of the attempts to constitute society' (Laclau 1990a: 91).

To put it differently, a post-foundational ontology thus seeks to ground the social not in a bedrock foundation, but rather in a continuous practice of ground*ing* (Marchart 2007: 174). There always and inevitably remains a 'gap' or 'split' between a particular image of the society on the one hand, and the very process of its being constructed or articulated on the other. The very possibility of a continuous grounding, after all, presupposes precisely that no ground can ever be complete. This difference between *grounding* and *ground* corresponds with those 'between *ordering* and *order*, between *changing* and *change*, between the *ontological* and the *ontic* – oppositions which are only contingently articulated through the investment of the first of the terms into the second' (Laclau 2000a: 85). Were these two sides to coalesce with each other, then evidently no such gap would exist, and the *ground* for the social could not be

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differentiated from the practice of its *grounding*. In that case, no 'ontological difference would be possible: the ontic and the ontological would exactly overlap and we would simply have pure presence' (Laclau and Zac 1994: 30). The social would fully coincide with itself and political change, or politics more generally, would not be imaginable (Marchart 2004). In other words, the social cannot have a ground that is completely closed in itself: it must always refer to a continuous process of *grounding* that reaches beyond it. And, the other way around, this grounding can only be made visible by reference to a particular, constructed ground, in which it has been invested.

What, then, *is* the social, according to Laclau? In order to answer this question, we first need to establish the distinction between 'the social' and 'the political'. Unlike classical Marxist theory, in which the political is generally understood to be part of a 'superstructure' that rests on a social or economic 'base', in Laclau's thought the political has 'the status of an *ontology of the social*' (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: xiv). It is impossible to conceive of a society that is completely free from the political, as this could only be 'a closed universe merely reproducing itself through repetitive practice' (Laclau 1990b: 35). Laclau on this point agrees with Claude Lefort – who, as we have seen, argues that the social is always politically invested and that 'the very notion of society already contains within it a reference to its political definition' (Lefort 1988b: 217). This is also why the social must always already have a particular institutional form (or, in Lefort's terms, a particular *mise en forme*).

Why, then, would it be necessary at all to distinguish between the social and the political, if the latter actively shapes and determines the former? This is so, because a social reality in which everything is immediately perceived as political is equally inconceivable. '[A] *total* political institution of the social can only be the result of an absolute omnipotent will, in which case the contingency of what has been instituted – and hence its political nature – would disappear' (Laclau 1990b: 35). As much as the social requires a distinctive political form, this form in turn loses its meaning if it is understood to encompass everything (Rancière 1999: 32). We must try to understand how the social – which is politically determined and thus potentially political in its every aspect – nevertheless 'overflows' the political and presents itself to us as the social.

This is where Laclau's concept of 'sedimentation' comes into play. He derives this metaphor from Edmund Husserl's phenomenological

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critique of science. Husserl argues that a scientific discipline becomes a constitutive part of our 'lifeworld' – the horizon on whose background we experience the world – only by virtue of its ability to forget or routinise its own history. The contingent choices, presuppositions and intuitions from which this discipline originated must be 'closed off through sedimentation or traditionalization' (Husserl 1970: 52). Thus perceived, scientific knowledge implies a forgetfulness for the contingencies that lie at its origins (Critchley 1999: 129). Smaller particles consolidate into larger particles, and eventually solidify. New layers of sediment cover the old ones, stratum upon stratum. The process of sedimentation is contingent, yet it may have a significant influence on the course of a stream or river, the composition of its water, or the vegetation in its beds. Sedimented particles may continue to have significant effects, even when they have long been covered under layers of dirt or debris. In a similar way, Husserl suggests, a scientific discipline gradually sediments, so that the contingencies and conventions at its origin can no longer be distinguished.

Laclau employs this metaphor in a slightly different context, when he claims that 'we live in a world of sedimented social practices' (Laclau et al. 1999: 146). Much like the scientific disciplines in Husserl's example, however, the institution of our social reality in general may also be understood to require a certain measure of 'forgetfulness'. The contingent actions and choices that lie at its origin – and the political divisions that originally invested our understanding of the social – are gradually concealed. The social could have been instituted in many different ways, but one of the effects of sedimentation is that 'the system of possible alternatives tends to vanish and the traces of the original contingency to fade' (Laclau 1990b: 34). Although the social has no 'objective' origins, the process of sedimentation gives rise to particular 'forms of "objectivity"' that underpin our understanding of the social (Lalcau 1990b: 35; Mouffe 2005b: 17).

Thus, whereas according to Husserl the task of philosophers is to reveal or 'reactivate' the sedimented origins of scientific traditions (Critchley 1999: 130–1), Laclau argues that the task of political actors is to disclose the antagonism and contingency that lie at the origins of sedimented social practices and relations (1990b: 34). 'It is only through this confrontation,' he holds, 'that the specifically political moment emerges, for it shows the contingent nature of articulations' (Laclau 2014b: 68). This, then, is what Laclau

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defines as 'the political': the 'instituting moment of society' (Laclau 1996: 49). Mouffe stresses that this is in fact a 'double moment . . . of dis-articulation and re-articulation' (Mouffe 2013: 74). The moment of 'the political' emerges whenever a sedimented conception of the social is confronted by a counter-hegemonic discourse that reactivates its contingent origins and inscribes it with a new understanding of the social.

How can Laclau's concept of sedimentation help us to better understand prefigurative democracy and its ability to change our understanding of the world – and, in consequence, the world itself? It seems evident that the occupations of Tahrir Square, Zuccotti Park and Gezi Park had a certain reactivating potential. They effectively disclosed a range of sedimented social relations and practices. The dictatorial regimes, democratic deficits, economic inequalities or severe austerity policies that these various occupy movements contested were generally held to be unquestionable or unchangeable. But as Žižek put it in his speech to OWS, when these movements emerged a taboo was broken (Žižek 2011: 68). Through their rhetoric and demands, as much as in their prefigurative practices, they showed that another world is indeed possible.

OWS, for instance, has clearly had a significant influence on the dominant political discourse – both in the United States and abroad. Arguably its chief accomplishment 'was changing the national conversation by giving Americans a new language – the 99 percent and the 1 percent – to frame the dual crises of income inequality and the corrupting influence of money in politics' (Levitin 2015). In the aftermath of these protests, many people in the US and abroad have continued to discuss economic issues in terms of class distinctions. And, though eventually unsuccessful, it is unlikely that Bernie Sanders's bid for the presidential nomination would have garnered so much popular support without this discursive shift (Stewart 2019).

Does this mean that Žižek's question, which was raised at the beginning of this chapter, can be answered in the positive? Have there been any significant societal changes on the 'day after', when the activist tent camps had been dismantled? In the next section I argue why, for Laclau, it will never be sufficient to temporarily challenge or reactivate a hegemonic discourse and its sedimented conception of the social. In order to establish durable political change in the long term, such discursive shifts must also be accompanied by structural change at an institutional level.

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Politics, the Political, and the Need for Institutional Change

In one of the last texts he wrote before his death in 2014, Laclau critically reflects on the political impact of occupy movements and their prefigurative practices. Of course, he acknowledges, movements such as OWS and 15-M had been successful in establishing a mass mobilisation at a civil society level. They also significantly contributed to the establishment of new equivalential chains and forged new political alliances between various social groups and minorities. But they would never lead to substantial political change in the long term as long as their experiments with horizontalist and decentralised forms of organisation were not 'complemented by the vertical dimension of "hegemony" – that is, a radical transformation of the state' (Laclau 2014c: 9). Real political change, in other words, also requires institutional reform. Any reactivation or resedimentation of our social 'objectivity' needs to translate itself at the institutional level. Alternatively, one may argue that change at the level of 'the political' must be accompanied by change at the level of 'politics'. This formulation, however, hints at a conceptual distinction that is often made in contemporary political theory, but which largely remains implicit in Laclau's work: the distinction between 'the political' and 'politics' (Marchart 2007: 142; Torfing 1999: 294). If we are to understand Laclau's conception of political change and his critique of recent occupy movements, we may first need to reconstruct this implicit conceptual distinction.

The distinction between 'the political' and 'politics' is generally considered to originate in Carl Schmitt's seminal *The Concept of the Political*. Schmitt seeks to establish a clear criterion by which to distinguish the political from other modes of human thought and action, such as morality, aesthetics and economics. The criterion that he ends up with is that in any political action or relation there is (at least potentially) a conflict at play between friends and enemies. 'Politics', then, refers to a plurality of ways in which this conflict is accommodated – both at the level of the state and outside of it (Schmitt 2007: 26). Whereas Laclau seems more reluctant to uncritically endorse this Schmittian distinction, Mouffe has employed it more explicitly to show why a certain measure of conflict is vital for our understanding of democracy. However, she does seek to 'domesticate' Schmitt's conception of politics. Rather than the ontic level on which the antagonism between friends and enemies

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comes to the surface, she reads politics as an institutional sphere in which the animosity or conflict between these camps can be staged in a non-violent and democratically legitimate fashion. Politics thus comes to be understood as 'the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of "the political"' (Mouffe 2005a: 101).

If a similar distinction between the political and politics can be found at all in Laclau's thought, it does significantly deviate from Schmitt's and Mouffe's conception in at least one respect. Laclau's differentiation between the social and the political suggests that the ordering and organising function (which Mouffe ascribes to the level of politics) should instead be located on the plane of the political itself. After all, as Laclau and Mouffe state in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 'the problem of the political is the problem of the institution of the social, that is, of the definition and articulation of social relations in a field criss-crossed with antagonisms' (2001: 153). In this respect, then, Laclau is much closer to Lefort than to Schmitt and Mouffe. If the political pertains to the moment when sedimented social practices and relations are reactivated and rearticulated, then the question how the social is to be instituted must already be at stake at this level. And the other way around: if the social is defined as a sedimentation of such relations and practices, then this always already implies a particular understanding of political order, democratic legitimacy and social organisation. The question by which kinds of institutions and procedures the social comes to be informed, in other words, cannot exclusively belong to a secondary, ontic level – this is already immediately at stake at the ontological moment of reactivation and articulation.

How, then, does Laclau implicitly distinguish between politics and the political? Since the latter is defined as the ontological moment of political institution, this suggests that politics could be understood as its 'enactment' (Marchart 2007: 142) or 'actualisation' (Dyrberg 2004: 243) on an everyday, institutional, discursive and organisational level (Laclau 1996: 62). This enactment takes place against the background of sedimented relations and practices that we have called 'the social'. As we have seen, the political cannot be accessed or known as such, since its moment of investment in the social is always sedimented. We thus need to imagine 'politics' as a distinctive sphere of institutions, practices, discourses and

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strategies that embody or actualise this particular investment in our everyday interactions. If the political entails the articulation of the kind of 'order' or 'structure' that must be inscribed into the social, then politics refers to the structuring of these articulations in practice (Dyrberg 2004: 241).

This does not mean, however, that this political moment of reactivation and rearticulation must be a rare or once-in-a-lifetime event. Unlike, for instance, Alain Badiou, Laclau does not regard the political as a 'Truth-Event' that emerges out of nothing and thus reveals the singular Truth of the situation in which it intervenes (Badiou 2003: 14; 2012: 81; see also Žižek 2008: 147–55). Seen from a Laclauian point of view, after all, the political is enacted at the most everyday level of our social and political reality (Laclau 2014a: 205n18). We thus 'always already enact, in the most diverse and "shattered" ways, the political within the realm of the social' (Marchart 2007: 174). This has two further consequences. First, the reactivation and rearticulation of our understanding of the social may occur at any moment, any time, and in any context. Even 'the most minor forms of acting' can be of political significance 'as long as they recall the original political moment of foundation' (Marchart 2018: 153). Second, it follows that no grand or small political act can ever have any revelatory or universal meaning in and of itself. After all, the political is only accessible at the ontic level of everyday politics. Its enactment at this ontic level is a gradual process, which requires the establishment of new political institutions and discourses that can inscribe the political with a particular meaning.

In consequence, if the politics of a social movement – its forms and strategies of mass mobilisation, its street protests and democratic experiments – is prefigurative, then as far as Laclau is concerned, the 'pre' should be taken rather literally here. As we have seen, social movements and their prefigurative practices can make a significant difference. They can serve to reactivate the sedimented relations and practices that constitute our social reality. They can, moreover, articulate significant, synecdochal representative claims ('We are the 99%') that prefigure a particular concept of collectivity or political agency. But, Laclau holds, these protesters will eventually return home. Others will have to take upon themselves the task of mediating, reformulating, claiming and exploiting these movements' message as theirs. In that respect, what happens on 'the day after' matters a great deal. The prefigurative will be refigured, so to speak. A particular, figural unity will be inscribed in the various

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experiences and perspectives that the political moment comprised, so that a new, limited set of relations and practices will start to sediment. In this way, prefigurative democracy may indeed give rise to significant social and political change in the long term – although a longer process of gradual refiguration, using different institutional and procedural means, will be required to effectuate it. Prefigurative democracy must then be followed by an attempt to acquire hegemony at an institutional level.

I will return to this relation between prefiguration and its figural unity further below, when I reconstruct Arendt's concept of crystallisation. At this point, however, I will conclude my discussion of Laclau with a brief, critical note. As argued, Laclau's synecdochal concept of representation requires that a particular part of a 'people' takes upon itself the role of embodying or representing it as a whole. Political representation, he argues, is a 'vehicle of universalization', as the particular comes to signify the universal (Laclau 2000b: 212). Radical change thus pertains to the gradual sedimentation of *one truth* – one compatible set of demands and identities – which is understood to fully and exhaustively signify the many different positions and experiences that originally comprised a social movement and its discourses and practices.

If we are to understand how the prefigurative practices of social movements may lead to radical change in the long term, Laclau's approach has one important shortcoming. At the end of the day, his concept of sedimentation only allows us to scrutinise the particular ideas, demands, experiences and identities that eventually come to comprise the centre of a counter-hegemonic discourse – or its 'nodal points', as Laclau and Mouffe call it (2001: 112). The eventual political impact of a singular demand, claim or practice wholly depends on its ability to inscribe a hegemonic discourse and its key signifiers with a new meaning. In other words, all that really matters are the ideas and concepts that eventually come to sediment and consolidate in our dominant understanding of the social. The rest can and will most likely be forgotten.

But, one may object, is this the only way in which prefigurative democracy may have political impact in the long run? Is a discourse, or sedimented social practice, all that remains after the political moment has passed? Is it really only the core demand or the predominant identity and discourse of a social movement that may be of relevance in the long term – alongside its ability to acquire or reform institutional power? Surely, OWS will primarily be remembered for

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its '99%' slogan, and the Egyptian revolution of 2011 for forcing Mubarak's resignation. But it is neither impossible nor unlikely that other experiences or minor aspects of these recent occupy movements will, eventually, turn out to have a lasting effect or impact on our world as well. Some of these experiences – or the stories that result from them – may presently not fulfil any significant articulatory role whatsoever. They may not even 'fit in', or correspond with, the dominant representation that a social movement has of itself. But perhaps, to stick with Laclau's own geological metaphor, a single political event or movement might as well result in a variety of sedimentations and thus have a plurality of outcomes.

For another perspective on the meaning or impact of political action on the 'day after', I return to Arendt. Like Laclau, Arendt uses a metaphor to explain how the deeds of political actors may persist after their moment has passed: she compares it with the process of 'crystallisation'. This idea of crystallisation not only resonates with her open-ended conception of political action, but explains her fascination with the history of revolutionary councils. More importantly, it provides us with an answer to the question formulated above: how can prefigurative democracy be understood to have a plurality of outcomes? And how can some of these outcomes continue to have a political relevance?

Arendt: Political Change as Crystallisation

Throughout her oeuvre, Arendt tends to use the term 'crystallisation' in two different ways. First, she regularly employs it in her earlier work to describe the emergence of particular political tendencies, movements or ideas (such as totalitarianism or antisemitism). In one of her later essays on Walter Benjamin she establishes it as an analogy for his philosophical method. Thinking, she argues, could be compared with pearl diving, in the sense that the theorist searches for crystallised or ossified fragments of the past, in order to retrieve them from oblivion. Nevertheless, I argue that these two concepts of crystallisation are more similar than they appear to be at first sight.

Before we turn to Arendt's reading of Benjamin, let me first reconstruct her earlier references to crystallisation, which appear most frequently in *Origins of Totalitarianism*.[1] Arendt deliberately employs the term here. In fact, she later suggests that it more accurately grasps what is at stake in her book, which 'does not really deal with the "origins" of totalitarianism – as its title unfortunately claims – but

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gives a historical account of the elements which crystallized into totalitarianism' (Arendt 1994a: 403). She elsewhere notes that '[t]he elements of totalitarianism comprise its origins, if by origins we do not understand "causes." Elements by themselves never cause anything. They become origins of events if and when they suddenly crystallize into fixed and definite forms' (Arendt 1994c: 325n12). It is not entirely clear where Arendt first picked up this metaphor. Lisa Disch (1994: 147) retraces it to Immanuel Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. In his Third Critique, which largely deals with questions of aesthetics, Kant discusses the beauty that we encounter in nature. He refers to crystals as an example of this natural beauty, which has no purpose outside itself (Kant 2000: 224). What is distinctive about crystalline formations, Kant claims, is that they take shape 'through a sudden solidification, not through a gradual transition from the fluid to the solid state, but as it were through a leap' (Kant 2000: 222).[2] This, then, is what Kant calls crystallisation: the abrupt moment when – under specific conditions – different elements suddenly join together, and thus bring about new formations that have entirely different qualities than these constituent elements.

Arendt describes the emergence of totalitarianism in similar terms. It was the product of various contingent circumstances: a range of racist and antisemitic traditions, imperialist tendencies and European pan-movements; various organisational principles, propaganda techniques and methods of domination. Many of the constituent elements of totalitarianism had been subterraneously present in European culture for decades or even centuries. It was only when these simmering movements, ideas and principles met each other that the totalitarian form of government could come into being. '[N]early all elements that later crystallized in the novel totalitarian phenomenon,' Arendt stresses, 'had hardly been noticed by either learned or public opinion' before they surfaced in the form of a totalitarian politics (Arendt 1968f: xv). It was only 'the final crystallizing catastrophe [that] brought these subterranean trends into the open and to public notice' (Arendt 1968f: xv). Much like in Kant's description of crystallisation, there was something immediate about the emergence of totalitarianism, which may have been perceived as a sudden 'leap'.

Another striking point of commonality between the formation of crystalline structures and that of totalitarianism is that, in both cases, the constituent elements tend to crystallise into something that is not merely a sum of its constituent parts. In the case of totalitarianism,

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several movements and tendencies 'crystallized into a new form of government and domination' (Arendt 2006c: 26). Moreover, Arendt strongly opposes the idea that the crystallisation of totalitarianism was historically inevitable given its conditions of emergence (Bernstein 1996: 52). These conditions are always contingent: they do not follow any predefined plan or order, and thus can only be reconstructed from a retrospective point of view. However, in one of her earlier discussions of antisemitism Arendt also suggests that at various historical stages, the 'most disparate elements crystallised, joining together to form a unified structure again and again, despite the numerous occasions when its political core split apart' (Arendt 2007: 101). The conditions of crystallisation may be contingent, but they are by no means arbitrary, and thus can always reappear. Crystallisation, thus perceived, is a process that has no single, identifiable 'root' or 'origin', and no clear, predefined end. It pertains to a sudden fusion – under particular, contingent conditions – of different elements, some of which have been subterraneously present for a long time.

Although Arendt uses the term 'crystallisation' most frequently in her earlier writings on totalitarianism and antisemitism, it also appears in other places throughout her oeuvre. In *On Revolution*, for instance, she employs it in reference to the French and Russian revolutions (2006a: 47, 220). But the most elaborate discussion of the metaphor is given in her 1968 essay on Walter Benjamin. It does appear, however, that Arendt here uses it in a slightly different way. Whereas in her earlier work crystallisation is presented as a relatively sudden moment of fusion between different elements (or a 'leap', as Kant puts it), in her reading of Benjamin it precisely refers to a gradual process of ossification or transformation.

The overall objective of Arendt's essay is to reconstruct a typical philosophical methodology that Benjamin applies throughout his writings. Benjamin, Arendt claims, was a philosopher who 'without being a poet . . . thought poetically' (1968e: 166). He also made extensive use of metaphors, text fragments and quotations. His unfinished *Passagenwerk*, for example, largely consists of quotations from other writings that he collaged together and then complemented with brief comments of his own (Benjamin 1999). Arendt claims that, for Benjamin, 'to quote is to name, and naming rather than speaking, the word rather than the sentence, brings truth to light' (Arendt 1968e: 203). What necessitates this 'poetic' approach, moreover, is an end to the philosophical tradition and the decline of

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authority that both Arendt and Benjamin claimed to witness in their lifetime. A past that does not bear the authority of a tradition cannot be transmitted. It cannot simply be passed on by one generation, and accepted by the next. Benjamin's work could therefore be read as an attempt to invent a new form of writing history, which tries to break with the historical 'continuum' (Benjamin 1968b: 262) or the 'homogeneous, empty time' (Benjamin 1968b: 261) that most historians seek to reconstruct. Benjamin's solution was to use a different historiographic methodology. His aim was not to give an exhaustive and consistent representation of the past, but rather to trace its fragments – the bits and pieces of passed ages that could be restored and re-examined. It is through these particular shards or fragments that we can acquire an understanding of our history (Arendt 1968e: 193).

One of Benjamin's central premises, therefore, is that no causal relation or moment can be deemed 'historical' in its own right. Any event, any act or experience, might eventually be singled out as a turning point in history, but this is always done retrospectively, from the position of the historian (Benjamin 1968b: 263). It is key, therefore, not to distinguish between 'minor' and 'major' historical events, as their relevance or significance is never given. 'Nothing that has ever happened,' Benjamin states, 'should be regarded as lost for history', as these fragments could always be retrieved (Benjamin 1968b: 254). It is one thing to say that a particular event or act has no place in our current tradition or dominant discourse. What does not follow, however, is that the act or event in question therefore is irrelevant. In fact, Benjamin states, one could 'speak of an unforgettable life or moment even if all men [*sic*] had forgotten it' (1968a: 70).

Seen from this perspective, historiography is first and foremost the work of collectors, who search among the debris of history for experiences that are worth being recalled, or memories that must be retold (Arendt 1968e: 199–200). Such historical 'monads', as Benjamin calls them, must be treated as if they could encompass the whole of history in their own right. Rather than 'digging' for forgotten origins or uncovering subterraneous layers of sediment, historiography thus is more comparable to making a 'snapshot' – to use a more contemporary metaphor. The historian should always try to 'arrest' the historical event or moment: 'Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives

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that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad' (Benjamin 1968b: 262–3).

According to Seyla Benhabib, it is precisely this 'method of fragmentary historiography' that Arendt adopted from Benjamin. Arendt too sought a methodology that could 'shatter chronology as the natural structure of narrative', and that would instead focus on the forgotten fragments of history – its 'dead ends, failures, and ruptures' (Benhabib 1996: 88). One example is Arendt's biographical writings, in which she gives an account of an historical epoch through the lens of a particular individual and their life story (see for instance Arendt 1974). Another example is her engagement with the short-lived revolutionary councils that emerged in various moments and contexts throughout the past two centuries. Finally, Arendt's historiographic methodology also becomes apparent in her use of etymological analysis. It is through theoretical concepts as well as more mundane terms that we can encounter the shards of a time long gone, which nevertheless – through their very presence in our everyday language – continue to shape our world and our understanding of it. The Greek *polis*, for example, 'will continue to exist on the bottom of our political existence . . . for as long as we use the word "politics"' (Arendt 1968e: 204). One important task of theorists is to retrieve these fragments from oblivion.

It is not hard to imagine why the Benjaminian metaphor of 'crystallisation' applies so well here. Arendt compares his 'historical fragments' to bones or other organic remains that sink to the bottom of the ocean and whose form and substance gradually change there over time. '[A]lthough the living is subject to the ruin of the time,' she claims, this 'process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization' (Arendt 1968e: 206). In the depth of the sea these fragments 'survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements' (Arendt 1968e: 206). Sooner or later, they may be found and brought back to the surface. But by that time, these fragments may not even remotely resemble their original, constitutive elements. Paraphrasing Shakespeare, Arendt claims that they will have 'suffered . . . the sea-change from living eyes to pearls, from living bones to coral' (Arendt 1968e: 203).[3] People will have forgotten about them, and perhaps one may not even be able to recognise their original shape or texture. But the 'pearls' or 'crystals' that are eventually found on the bottom of the ocean will be no less valuable or interesting than the remains that once sank down. The purpose of pearl diving, then, is neither to

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restore these remains in their original form, nor to investigate or appreciate the environment in which they ossified and crystallised over time. The point is to retrieve them and bring them to the surface, where they can be admired in their new, crystallised form. This, Arendt concludes in her reading of Benjamin, is the task of the theorist:

> Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths and to carry them to the surface, . . . *thinking* delves into the depths of the past – but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. (Arendt 1968e: 205)

Thus, two different concepts of crystallisation that can be found throughout Arendt's oeuvre. The first, which appears frequently in her earlier work, is derived from Kant's aesthetics. Arendt uses it 'to resist making a causal explanation of totalitarianism, describing it as an amalgam of fragments that are only contingently related' (Disch 1994: 147). Rather than attempting to uncover the origins or causes of totalitarianism's emergence, she seeks to disentangle and reconstruct its various, constituent elements, and the conditions of their encounter. In Arendt's later essay on Benjamin, however, crystallisation is presented as a gradual process rather than as a sudden moment or eruption. It should be noted that both, indeed, are natural processes of crystallisation – but they nevertheless are different processes, which have different implications as analogies of political change. The difference between her Kantian and her Benjaminian concept of crystallisation is that in the latter case, crystalline formations do not 'spring forth' from a fusion of various subterraneous elements. Instead, crystallisation here is understood as a gradual process.

However, these two conceptions of crystallisation also seem to have something essential in common (Disch 1997: 147n12). Both teach us that political experiences, ideas, memories or tendencies from the past may disappear from the public eye, but they can continue to lead a subterraneous life. They may resurface whenever they meet other subterraneous elements, thus constituting a new crystalline formation. Or they undergo a gradual transformation. The conditions under which these forgotten fragments may resurface are contingent. But when they do make it back to the surface, in a new

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form and context, these forgotten fragments of the past can have a significant impact.

What does this mean concretely? How exactly can the experiences, memories or ideas of political actors be preserved – and, eventually, retrieved – in order to make a difference in the long term? Arguably the greatest weakness of Arendt's metaphor is that it implies (much like Laclau's sedimentation, for that matter) that such processes tend to take their own, natural course. It suggests that all political theorists need to do is to '[dig] under the rubble of history so as to recover those "pearls" of past experience' (Benhabib 1996: 87). But the concept of crystallisation only makes for a useful metaphor if it helps us to understand the role of the theorist or storyteller in this process of transformation. In that respect, the metaphor indeed falls short. This weakness becomes most notable in Arendt's discussion of Benjamin, where she discusses crystallisation as a gradual process. Ultimately, an additional metaphor is required to explain how past ideas and experiences may continue to play a political role long after their moment has passed: that of the pearl diver, who retrieves these crystalline formations from the bottom of the ocean. One may argue that this is the real political metaphor: without the work of theorists, historians and storytellers we would never learn of the existence of these past ideas and experiences. Before I continue to compare Arendt's metaphor of crystallisation with Laclau's notion of sedimentation, I will therefore briefly reconstruct the political role that she ascribes to stories and storytelling in the next section.

The Political Role of the Storyteller

One essential trait of prefigurative democracy is its open-endedness. Those involved in a prefigurative politics thus often seek to prolong their practices as much as possible. It is for this reason that Arendt's concept of action corresponds so well with the self-perception of prefigurative social movements, which often do not seem to pursue any clear, predefined end. This also explains why the council may be the most suitable institutional form for a prefigurative democracy in the long term, as it best caters to a radically open-ended politics.

Yet, it nevertheless seems to be the case that political action often does, sooner or later, come to its end – even if, in many cases, this end is not wanted, anticipated or projected by the actors in question. The occupy movements of the previous decade, such as OWS, 15-M, the Gezi Park protests or Nuit Debout, clearly were no exception to this

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rule: eventually, the squares cleared out, the activist tent camps were dismantled, and their temporary inhabitants were either arrested or returned home. Of course, such social movements may always come back and try again, or instead resolve to different tactics next time. But even from Arendt's point of view, there is a certain truth to the idea that, eventually, 'people always go home' (Errejón and Mouffe 2016: 72). What, then, is supposed to happen on the 'day after'?

In some respects, Arendt's answer to this question seems to resonate with that of Laclau. Even if political actions come to an end – eventually, and often in spite of themselves – it does not follow that they cease to have political significance. The experiences and memories of the political moment may continue to shape our world and our understanding of it, long after the actors have left the scene. For Arendt, the end of political action is by no means the end of politics. Once the moment has passed and the actors returned home, there is another political role to be played by the storyteller or the historian who will narrate their story (Beiner 1994: 374).

Throughout her work, Arendt presents a number of arguments to distinguish between the political role of actors and of storytellers. Although the former 'may in rare cases give an entirely trustworthy statement of intentions, aims, and motives' (Arendt 1958: 192), they usually do not offer a very accurate account of their own deeds. What exactly was at stake in a moment of political action, Arendt claims, 'reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants' (Arendt 1968e: 192; see also Arendt 1968c: 21). Arendt hence is rather critical of actors who seek to 'make' their own life story (1968b: 106). How one's acts will be remembered and one's stories retold, she holds, is not in the hands of the actor themselves. In the end, 'the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer' (Arendt 1958: 184; see also Cavarero 2000: 28). The storyteller, in turn, is dependent on the actions that others began since nobody – neither the actor nor the storyteller – can legitimately claim to have authored this story on their own. Rather, it is precisely in the interaction between actor and storyteller that a story takes shape (Pirro 2001: 77–8).

A second, related, reason to distinguish between the role of the actor and that of the storyteller is that political action is often too complex and messy. The anarchist author and independent diplomat Carne Ross offers an interesting metaphor that helps to better

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appreciate this complexity. In popular culture, politics is often imagined to resemble a game of chess: 'it is complicated, it involves two clearly defined opponents, and, . . . although a very difficult game, it is ultimately comprehensible' (Ross 2011: 130). But rather than an orderly chessboard, Ross argues, politics is more comparable to a Jackson Pollock painting: 'a swirling miasma of billions upon billions of interactions, not on a fixed pattern, or a net, but an ever-changing mesh of connections, some significant but temporary, some long-lasting but inconsequential' (Ross 2011: 132; see also Scott 2012: 141). Hence, to grasp the meaning of a particular political act or moment, we need to differentiate between the innumerable experiences, ideals, motivations and impressions that it comprises.

Arendt also holds that, in itself, such a 'totality of facts and event . . . is unascertainable' (2006d: 257). Truth is never revealed simply by summing up facts. They must first lose some of their eventual contingency, and instead 'acquire some humanly comprehensible meaning' (Arendt 2006d: 257). This is the task of the storyteller – be it an artist, a historian, a philosopher or a political theorist. By constructing relations between different events or acts; by amplifying and emphasising certain aspects whilst concealing or omitting others; by drawing patterns, and inscribing metaphors or comparisons, the storyteller creates a certain unity that was present – but not immediately apparent – in the bare facts themselves. Storytellers thus add something to the narrated story. They provide a structure, consistency or focus without which the facts would remain incomprehensible. As Adriana Cavarero argues, '[t]he significance of the story lies precisely in the figural *unity* of the design'. But it is only through storytelling that this design can be retrospectively inscribed in it. Political action 'does not follow from any projected plan' (Cavarero 2000: 1). If it at all acquires a figural unity, this 'only comes afterwards' (Cavarero 2000: 144). Storytellers preserve our experiences by abstracting a certain figural unity or structure from them (Cavarero 2000: 25). This articulatory process is precisely what Arendt elsewhere describes as crystallisation: a gradual transformation or a sudden 'springing together' of past memories and experiences into a new formation. Such a crystalline formation may show us its constituent elements in an entirely different structure and composition.

What, then, does this teach us about political change? For Arendt, change is never established in the moment of action per se. Although many of her more radical, contemporary commentators tend to

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focus on her analysis of the extraordinary or constitutive political moments itself, what happens in its aftermath is of no less significance. Arendt's concept of political action pertains first and foremost to the prefigurative and experimental moment in which actors gather to act and organise without any predefined end. But in order to become a constitutive part of our lifeworld, their deeds and words 'must first be seen, heard and remembered and then transformed' (Arendt 1958: 95). Through storytelling, the prefigurative moment may lose some of its initial, 'messy' or 'swirly' characteristics (to stick with Ross's metaphor of the Pollock painting), and retrospectively acquire a more concrete and figurative form. Moreover, such stories not only have an important, articulatory function, but they also serve to 'provoke and inspire others to act' (Kateb 1987: 14).

Take, for example, David Graeber's book *The Democracy Project*, from which I have quoted extensively throughout the past chapters. OWS has been widely dismissed as an utter failure, as it allegedly did not establish anything of significance. But in his account, Graeber instead seeks to explain why this movement in fact *did* 'work' (Graeber 2013: 59; Van de Sande 2014). 'In one year,' he asserts, '*Occupy* managed to both identify the problem – a system of class power that has effectively fused together finance and government – and to propose a solution: the creation of a genuinely democratic culture' (Graeber 2013: 149). Seen from this perspective, then, OWS indeed was very successful: it introduced a new popular identity ('the 99%'), and established a new political discourse that allows Americans to speak of their society in terms of a class distinction (Graeber 2013: 109). By occupying public space, it created or reappropriated a commons. OWS also experimentally gave rise to new experiences with, and notions of, political organisation, decision-making and mass mobilisation. And, Graeber holds, it 'broke the spell' of a hegemonic, neoliberal discourse, and proved to its participants that another world *is* possible (Graeber 2013: 295). Of course, one could give many other – and much less favourable – accounts of these experiences. Graeber's story is undeniably incomplete and selective. But, with Arendt, we may conclude that this is precisely what renders storytelling a political practice. From the vast amount of experiences and memories that comprised OWS's prefigurative practices, Graeber has carved out a story that follows a concrete pattern and inscribes the moment with a particular meaning. It thus presents OWS experiences in a new, crystalline form. Through such accounts, OWS and similar prefigurative movements may continue

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to inform the political practices and discourses of future generations of activists.

Conclusion: 'In the Beginning' and 'Once Upon a Time'

Two metaphors may help us to understand how prefigurative practices continue to shape our social and political reality, long after the street or the occupied square has been evacuated and the protesters have returned home (or have been arrested): Laclau's notion of sedimentation and Arendt's concept of crystallisation. Both imply that, in order to have significant impact in the long term, political experiences must be translated in one way or the other. Arendt and Laclau also seem to agree that whatever happens in the political moment itself by no means determines how it will be perceived or appreciated in the future. Whether a prefigurative action can be deemed (un)successful, (in)significant or historically (ir)relevant largely depends on the meaning that is retrospectively inscribed in it. Sedimentation and crystallisation could both be considered as figurative processes that succeed the prefigurative moment of political action. In this respect, there appears to be a strong similarity between these two metaphors.

Yet, these two metaphors also serve very different purposes. Laclau's sedimentation refers to the establishment of a political discourse and its inscription in a sedimented concept of the social. Arendt's crystallisation, on the other hand, is closely related to the practice of storytelling. Discourses and stories differ from each other in a number of respects. To begin with, discourses have no 'outside', so to speak. We continuously reproduce a hegemonic discourse in our everyday relations and communication – often without being aware of it. Stories, on the other hand, 'are designed and deliberate, at least broadly scripted . . . and deployed in pursuit of particular objectives' (Selbin 2010: 48). They tend to have a concrete form, which distinguishes them from other discursive elements. Or, as Francesca Polletta (2006: 7) puts it, 'most people know when they are telling a story'. From this follows, second, that different stories or divergent accounts of the same event are not mutually exclusive. The very particularity of stories – the fact that they are always told from a particular position or perspective, with a specific intention, and that they have a deliberate structure – precisely implies that there will always be other stories that may shed an entirely different light on the matter. Any act or moment can be narrated or explained in innumerable different ways. In fact, for Arendt this is precisely

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the purpose of storytelling: it is by hearing many different stories, each told from their own perspective, that we learn to 'think with an enlarged mentality' and that 'one trains one's imagination to go visiting' (Arendt 1992: 43). Stories have a pedagogic function: they stimulate and develop the critical faculties of the audience (Disch 1993: 681), precisely because they are always told from a singular and particular perspective. This also implies that, unlike discourses, stories do not necessarily seek hegemony. A story can well exist in the periphery of a dominant discourse without losing any of its critical potential. Even if it goes largely forgotten, it always remains to hold the promise of rediscovery. Sooner or later, Benjamin's 'pearl diver' may retrieve it from oblivion and bring it back to the surface.

A political discourse, on the other hand, typically seeks to 'dominate the field of discursivity' (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 112). As we have seen in the previous chapter, this means that it must take upon itself the role to represent or embody the social in its entirely – even though this always remains an impossibility. A discourse must at least pretend to be totalising and exhaustive. Its success precisely depends on its ability to dominate the public debate and institutions and to sediment in our common understanding of the social. Of course, there are always different discourses competing for hegemony, but they merely coexist to the extent that they are each other's constitutive outside – an outside that, paradoxically, is inevitably implied in any attempt to represent the social in its totality.

It is here that we arrive at the heart of the matter. The difference between discourses and stories is precisely that the former must sediment into our dominant understanding of the social, whilst stories may crystallise independently of each other, and thus continue to live subterraneously. The question is to what extent these two perspectives are compatible. Can sedimentation and crystallisation be understood to exist alongside, or even presuppose, each other? The latter most certainly seems to be the case if we approach it from Laclau's perspective. What he describes as a process of articulation pertains precisely to the continuous incorporation – and, as a consequence, the reinscription – of demands, identities, stories and experiences into a new, counter-hegemonic discourse. The construction of equivalential chains, in other words, could well be compared with a 'springing together' of old discursive elements into new formations and compositions. In fact, Laclau uses the term 'crystallisation' rather frequently to describe precisely this process. He argues, for instance, that a chain of equivalence 'would not go beyond a vague

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feeling of solidarity if [it] did not crystallize in a certain discursive identity' (Laclau 2005a: 93). When demands and identities acquire hegemony, he states elsewhere, they thus come to be 'crystallised in sedimented social practices' (Laclau 2005a: 224). As much as stories are among the constituent part of a discourse, crystalline formations can indeed be seen to settle into a more encompassing sediment bed. But all that matters for Laclau, ultimately, is what crystalline formations end up constituting the 'top layer' of social sediment. This is where his account of crystallisation differs significantly from that of Arendt, for whom any crystalline formation will retain its potential relevance and promise for the future, no matter what role it may eventually come to play in the establishment of a new counter-hegemonic discourse.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the difference between these two logics is to compare them with two fundamentally different narrative forms. In *On Human Conduct*, Michael Oakeshott makes a distinction between stories that typically start with 'In the beginning . . .' and the ones that commence with 'Once upon a time . . .' Stories of the first category serve to construct a myth. They seek to unearth one particular origin or create a single grand narrative that may 'serve as an authority for future conduct' (Oakeshott 1975: 105). This is why most foundational myths of cultural and/or political communities start with 'In the beginning there was . . .' It appears that the sedimentation of social relations and practices requires such foundational myths. But Oakeshott – who is arguably a rare case of a non-foundationalist conservative (Marchart 2007: 3) – also distinguishes another narrative form. 'Such a story does not open with the unconditional, "In the beginning . . ." but with a conditional, "Once upon a time . . ." And it has no unconditional conclusion; its end is the beginning of another story' (Oakeshott 1975: 105).

Rather than fixating on the supposed origin or outcomes of a narrated act or event, these 'Once upon a time . . .' stories allow us to look for its own meaning. And, Bonnie Honig (2009: 36) adds, they 'invite entry into another time and postulate many temporalities. (That they imagine *a* time suggests there are others as well)'. Their narrative form implies that there are in fact many 'times' existing alongside each other – and, thus, that there are many different stories to be told. Whereas an 'In the beginning . . .' story testifies to a sedimentary logic, the 'Once upon a time . . .' form implies that stories can also continue to lead their own, subterraneous life in the peripheries of our hegemonic, political discourses.

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Arendt's and Laclau's concepts of political change thus seem to correspond with these two different narrative forms. Nevertheless, what these philosophers seem to have in common is that both shed a different light on the question whether, or how, prefigurative democracy can be rendered a 'success' or a 'failure'. Seen from both perspectives, Žižek's appeal to the OWS activists – 'What matters is the day after . . . Will there be any changes then?' – cannot immediately be answered. From a Laclauian point of view this is impossible because prefigurative democracy must eventually contribute to the articulation of a counter-hegemonic discourse. But this is often a long and gradual process, the course of which is contingent on many factors and influences. And although prefigurative practices and the representative claims that accompany them may thus have a significant impact, it is impossible to pinpoint the exact contribution of singular political events or interventions.

Arendt, on the other hand, criticises the very notion that political action can be 'successful' to a greater or lesser extent. She enables us to understand how prefigurative democracy questions this criterion at a much more fundamental level. Seen from an Arendtian perspective, prefigurative democracy is first and foremost a meaningful experience to those engaged in it. Its eventual outcomes do not affect the immediate experience of freedom that it entails. This does not mean, of course, that such experiences cannot be a source of inspiration, hope or empowerment to others in the future. What remains are the stories and accounts of political deeds in the past. They may be forgotten, or suppressed. But eventually they can always be retrieved and retold. This is precisely why Arendt repeatedly returns to the past experiences of revolutionary councils throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. No matter how these previous experiments with radical self-organisation and spaces of *isonomia* eventually came to an end, the accounts of these short-lived council systems also continued to inspire others and testified to the possibility that freedom be realised in the 'here and now'. Thus, as much as 'success' is never a sufficient criterion by which to assess such prefigurative practices, they can also never 'fail' since the stories based on them will retain their promise for the future. Sooner or later these stories may re-emerge in a new form and continue to play their part in the political institution of society.

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